

America Can't Fix Poverty Until It Stops Hating Poor People

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A bipartisan plea to stop “othering” those living on the economic margins

“Hell is other people,” famously wrote the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre at the close of his 1943 play *No Exit*. While for Sartre this was a philosophically sophisticated point, in America today it has become simply the way we increasingly treat people at the margins of our society. We see whole groups of people as unlike ourselves—as the undesirable “other.”

Many different kinds of people have been harmfully “othered” throughout our country’s history, and the plights of these groups have received well-deserved attention and focus. But there is one group that we systematically other today—with hugely damaging consequences—while hardly even realizing that we are doing it. Those people are Americans living in poverty.

Research consistently finds that Americans exhibit a disturbing level of antipathy towards those on the economic margins. In a [2001 word-association study](#), researchers from Kansas State and Rice Universities asked subjects to rate how well a variety of words described different social groups. Compared to their ratings of middle-class people, and given no information except economic status, the average subject described poor people as 39 percent more “unpleasant,” 95 percent more “unmotivated,” and twice as “dirty.”

In [another 2002 study](#), researchers from Princeton, UCLA, and Lawrence University asked students and adults to gauge society’s views toward several often-stereotyped groups. Other out-groups were demeaned as either incompetent but personally warm, or unfriendly but competent; only the poor were consistently classified as both unfriendly and incompetent. Americans, it seems, have a uniquely low opinion of poor people: We offer them neither our empathy nor our respect.

This antipathy is not the result of comfortable Americans having to endure constant exposure to the poor. On the contrary, a sharp uptick in socioeconomic stratification and segregation has been widely documented across the right and left, from Charles Murray to Robert Putnam. For growing percentages of middle- and upper-class Americans, interactions with poor and working-class people are very rare. Well-to-do Americans have almost no meaningful cultural contact with anyone from economically marginalized communities—from struggling inner cities to decaying suburbs to depressed rural counties.

One might surmise this separation is the result of the widespread negative attitudes about people in poverty. But there is good reason to believe the causality also runs in the other direction. Psychologists have long studied a phenomenon called the “[Ben Franklin effect](#),” named for the Founding Father’s observation that our appraisals of other people can actually follow our

behavior towards them, rather than just the other way around. Specifically, Franklin noted, we tend to like people more after we have granted them a favor.

A canonical psychology experiment from 1971 lent weight to Franklin's hypothesis—and its unpleasant flip side. Researchers at the University of North Carolina divided subjects into “learners” and “teachers” and asked the latter to teach the former a simple task. When the learners made mistakes, the teachers were randomly assigned either to reassure and encourage the learners or to insult and criticize them. Later, the teachers were questioned about the likability of their learners. Rather than sympathizing with the people the experiment had randomly forced them to victimize, the teachers rated the learners they'd insulted more negatively than the people they had praised and encouraged. Even though the teachers had not chosen the structure that surrounded them, it nevertheless adulterated their empathy and reduced their fellow-feeling for people they had no reason to dislike.

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Given all this, it is reasonable to conclude that middle-class and wealthy Americans' social distance from people in poverty exists in a mutually-reinforcing cycle with the contempt they feel towards them. This textbook case of othering grows even more intense when social distance involves the overlay of multiple identities, such as race, class, religion and ethnicity. When the range of ascribed differences between groups is greater, the outgroup is that much likelier to be viewed as intrinsically different or alien.

Some evolutionary biologists describe this tendency to sort ourselves into ingroups and outgroups as an organic phenomenon that once served a defensive function. But today, othering is a political and social process, and it poses a grave moral problem. Othering uses bonds of shared identity to deny empathy and a sense of belonging to others. It gives elites and dominant groups an excuse to see social problems as distant pathologies, rather than soluble crises affecting people who are like them. And in the specific case of people living in poverty, it creates manmade barriers to the social inclusion and economic mobility of vulnerable people and communities.

Without intervention, this problem is likely to only get worse. A prosperous society like ours will always have the ability to sustain those in poverty in ways that may be materially adequate, but this can be totally bereft of any meaningful sense of autonomy or earned success. We need to address the forces that are pulling us apart along social and economic lines. We need, both personally and structurally, to change the way we see our fellow citizens who are struggling.

To begin with, traditional welfare programs—while materially important—sometimes exacerbate othering insofar as they treat temporarily poor people as permanent cases of “dependency” who are net liabilities to the American economy and do not really belong in productive society. These programs are secondary lines of defense against poverty at best. And if we continue to see these brothers and sisters of ours as people who do not really belong in our country, we are not likely to support policies that actually lift them up into economic self-sufficiency.

Our primary policy focus must not merely be *helping* the poor or the marginalized “other,” but rather restoring them to a position in which they are *needed*—in which they are necessary, integral participants in in our economy, our communities, and our collective imagination.

To be sure, there is no single silver bullet. Proposed policies will vary as widely as do Americans’ political preferences. Some will advocate for education reform to improve the human capital prospects of children in poverty. Others will call for criminal justice reform so our society incarcerates fewer people and better prepares the formerly imprisoned for re-entry. Still others will insist that broad tax and regulatory reform are the surest path to robust economic growth and more job opportunities for everyon

A competition of ideas is healthy. But it requires a deep moral consensus: a shared belief in the equal dignity of *all* people. And that entails a deliberate, conscious effort to bridge the growing physical, cultural, and emotional gaps that increasingly set low-income people apart as something other than the rest of America.

Focusing intently on this problem is neither a progressive nor a conservative stance; it simply follows from remembering our national roots and our shared humanity. Everyone reading this has a different family story. Some of us descended from penniless immigrants; others from political refugees; some were dispossessed of their land and culture; still others, to our country’s shame, were brought here in chains. What very few American families have in their past is power or privilege.

We are a nation comprised of people with huge variation in our racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds—and in our current economic status. But there are many things we share, and not least among them is the fact that almost everyone is descended from people whose families experienced poverty and marginalization. We respect our ancestors by recognizing and claiming today’s poor people as our brothers and sisters, and by rebuilding a society and an economy capable of creating greater justice for everyone.

Otherring the poor will only cease when we acknowledge the truth: They are us, and we all belong together.